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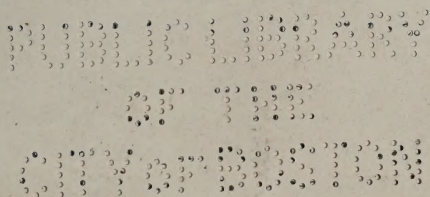
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JOHN BARNETT, MUSICIAN

BY HENRY M. ROGERS

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JOHN BARNETT, MUSICIAN

By HENRY M. ROGERS, '62

I AM, without question, the only man in the United States, and probably the only man anywhere on the planet, who has lived in intimate, personal and affectionate relation with John Barnett, musician, sometimes called "The Father of English Opera," and who was himself on the stage of Drury Lane Theatre when Edmund Kean made his London début as "Shylock" on the 26th of January, 1814, and created a new epoch in dramatic characterization.

Cicero tells us that Quintus Mucius, the augur, used to relate many things of Caius Lælius, his father-in-law, and did not scruple in every discourse to call him a wise man.

If such a thing were deemed not unfitting but even commendable by Cicero, why should a couple of thousand years change the proprieties? At any rate, I shall risk writing of my father-in-law, John Barnett, the most interesting man I have ever known.

In the intimacy of our home life at "Cotteswold," his beautiful place in Gloucestershire, on many a summer day and evening I drew from him incidents of his career as well as a wealth of running commentaries on the careers of his associates and friends who formed a part of the art and literature of their time, all of whom were of the warp and woof of London life in the early years of the nineteenth century.

He was born at Bedford, in England, on the 15th day of July, 1802, and died at Leckhampton Hill, under the Cotteswolds near Cheltenham, on the 17th day of April, 1890. Our friendship began at Cheltenham in 1878 and continued unimpaired until his death. At seventy-six years of age when I first saw him, he was a strikingly impressive man, of medium height, with a handsome and most intelligent face, a finely shaped head crowned with beautiful iron-gray hair; and in the fashion of an older day, he wore a moustache and a "goatee" and otherwise was closely shaven. The dark, tanned skin, the ruddy, healthful complexion, the bright eye, the quick, impetuous movement, the refined voice and cultivated speech, and last but not least the cordial and old-fashioned courtesy as he took me by the hand and

welcomed me, can never be forgotten; nor can his first sally as we drove towards "Cotteswold," "I hope you'll like it, my Friend"; — a pause, — a twinkle of the eye; — a laugh, — and the pious conclusion, "Thank God — we have no neighbors!" It seems he was always fearful of being crowded and so had enlarged his boundaries.

"Cotteswold" is on Leckhampton Hill, under the Cotteswold Hills, and looks down into the vale of Gloucester broadly spread and ever new, and at the beautiful Malvern Hills beyond, and here in his library and in his garden, with his whole family about him, whenever possible, with frequent visits to Cheltenham and rather infrequent visits to London and into Wales, reading, writing, composing, teaching and enjoying everything around him to the fullest, he passed his last years.

The gift of music displayed itself early in John Barnett. When but ten years old he had not only shown marked talent for music, but possessed a contralto voice of rare quality and sweetness. At this tender age he was articled to Samuel James Arnold, the son of Dr. Arnold, and the proprietor of the Lyceum Theatre as well as manager of Drury Lane. Young Barnett made his first appearance on the stage at the Lyceum in the summer of 1813 as Dick in the "Shipwreck," and met with extraordinary success.

He had made his first public appearance as a singer long before that. His mother had taken him to hear John Braham (1774–1856) sing Capt. Macheath in "The Beggar's Opera." The great tenor's performance did not please the youngster, for no sooner did the curtain fall at the close of the first act, than in spite of his mother's protests, he volubly and in a loud, ringing voice informed those nearest to him, that *he* could sing "a deal better." On being goodnaturedly invited to prove it, he readily consented, and hoisted aloft on the shoulders of two stalwart supporters, he sang a song or two to the huge delight of the astonished audience, who rewarded him with enthusiastic applause.

As he was with the Arnolds and in the Lyceum and Drury Lane Theatres as a mere boy, it was quite natural for him to speak of Edmund Kean, Dicky Peake, Charles Mathews, the Elder, Munden, Dowton, Harley, Grimaldi, Charles Young, Mrs. Billington and many other faraway worthies. But it was always difficult, nevertheless, in listening to John Barnett, to realize that this bright, alert, sparkling gentleman, who was talking to you and who seemed to be in his late fifties, could have known and been a part of the lives of the ancients.

It seemed simply incredible that his name could have appeared upon the play bills at Drury Lane at the same time with that of the great Edmund Kean (1787-1833). That he had even been patted good-humoredly on the cheek by that genius and had been familiarly called "little Johnny Barnett" by him. And more than this, that "little Johnny Barnett" had been an eye witness to the most dramatic night known to the English stage, when this same Edmund Kean made his first appearance at Drury Lane, as Shylock, January 26, 1814.

The story of that night, known as it is to every lover of stage history, got a new significance from "little Barnett's" lips. He did not know, what we know now, that the great Edmund had but an hour or two before "little Johnny" first saw him, kissed his wife as he left the humble lodgings in Cecil Street, with the words "I wish I was going to be shot," and with his modest stage "properties" in a bundle, had tramped through the slush of the London streets, his boots letting in the melting snow, to the stage door of Drury Lane. "Little J. B.," as he was familiarly called, perhaps heard Jack Bannister and Oxberry offer a friendly word to the new star, — but they were the only ones; the rest of the company looked askance, critically and superciliously, and croakingly predicted the failure of this newcomer, small, swarthy, with the flashing eyes of unfathomable depths. In the light of our present knowledge, after one hundred and seven years, we can almost hear the heartbreaking words from Kean's lips, — "My God! If I succeed, I shall go mad!"

Remembering this story, and listening to this old-young man, we recall with him that night and see with him the small audience; we watch their interested, but undemonstrative attention; and then comes the great third act with Kean's terrific, overwhelming display of passion in the scenes with Salarino and Salanio after Jessica's flight, and later with Tubal, a rushing torrent, sweeping everything before it — and so to the end. We seem to hear that audience suddenly awakened and then frenzied, and share Barnett's boyish surprise that so small an audience could make so much noise; that was, he told me, the most vivid impression left upon his mind, and the most lasting; a *mad* audience, as it were.

Later, he was one of the singing witches on Kean's first appearance as Macbeth. Had he known as much then as we do now, he would have peeped through the hole in the curtain and perhaps seen Byron and Charles Lamb and Hazlitt in the pit, and even his own future controversialist friend, Leigh Hunt. Perhaps the pages of the *Tatler*

even then glowed in anticipation with the heat of the battle royal to be fought some day by Leigh Hunt and "little Johnny Barnett."

The name of the elder Mathews recalls an incident perhaps worth setting down. I once asked Mr. Barnett if he had ever seen Talma, the great French tragedian (1763-1826). "Yes," he said, "I saw him and I heard him recite from 'Hamlet.'" I said, "When he was in England and at a complimentary dinner given to him (probably before 1817), the elder Mathews made a speech from behind the back of a boy; did you ever hear of that?" "God bless my soul! How did *you* ever know that?" he asked. I said, "I read it in some sketch or life of the elder Mathews, and I am apt to remember what is of no consequence." He then continued, "Do people put such things as that in books? I remember all about it, for I was the boy! I was taken to the dinner by my guardian, who seated me between Mathews and himself. When the speaking was on, and the turn of Mathews came, he turned and said to me, 'Here, Johnny, stand up!' On my doing so, he lifted me to the top of the table; then he made me put my hands behind my back, put his arms under my arm pits, and spoke in a boy's voice through his whole speech, making his gestures as if they were mine."

"Little J. B.," as he was affectionately called, sang for some five years at Drury Lane and Covent Garden (1813-18), and then his voice having changed he took up the study of music seriously. His instructors for the piano were Ferdinand Ries, Beethoven's favorite pupil, Sexto Perez, and Kalkbrenner; and under William Horsley he took his first lessons in harmony and composition. Then to the hand of Xavier Schneider at Frankfurt, and before he had finished he had made himself master of musical difficulties and resources, and was ready to begin his musical career. At once he began to write songs full of melodic beauty.

"The Light Guitar" brought him into prominence. He had been obliged to present the copyright gratuitously to the publishers in order to see it in print. Madame Vestris came upon it accidentally, introduced it into a musical farce, "The Epaulette," and in a couple of days the town rang with it. "Not a Drum was Heard," sung by Sapio, at Madame Catalani's farewell concert, surpassed even the success of "The Light Guitar," and many songs followed in rapid succession, one after another, rivaling each other in popularity. He was prolific in production, though it was said that his publishers grumbled because he could not produce a piece every hour of the day. During his life he is said to have composed upwards of two thousand songs.

In 1827, he returned to the old haunts of the stage once more and wrote music for the farce by Richard Peake, "Before Breakfast" (1825) in which the elder Mathews sang Barnett's buffo songs which became greatly in vogue. The music written for "Monsieur Mallet," an operetta by Moncrieff, was exceedingly popular, and later "Rise, Gentle Moon," introduced in Planché's "Charles XII," added to the young composer's fame. It is worthy of record just here that his three songs, "The Light Guitar," "Not a Drum was Heard," and "Rise, Gentle Moon," through their phenomenal sale reinstated pecuniarily a prominent music publishing firm of London then on the verge of bankruptcy. A beautiful silver vase presented to John Barnett, as an expression of gratitude, is still in possession of a member of his family in Boston.

An incident of this period of his career was always referred to by him with great delight. A three-act opera called "The Carnival at Naples" was in progress. The author, a Mr. Diamond, resided at Naples and declined to write one line of the lyrics until the music had been composed; so Mr. Barnett, being furnished with the principal "situations" of the piece, had to sit down and draw upon his poetical imagination, by penning "nonsense verses." By some mistake, at the first rehearsal, a copy of one of Mr. Barnett's effusions was read out in lieu of Mr. Diamond's poetry. Mr. Bartley, the manager, was trapped into raising a general laugh at the expense of his critical judgment. "Gaily glides the moon amid effulgent day" began the person to whom the reading of the piece had been entrusted. "That's a beautiful line," interrupted Mr. Bartley; — "a beautiful line; in Diamond's very best style. Ah — there's no mistaking him!" The roars which the discovery of the error provoked greatly disconcerted Mr. Bartley.

After the production of the operetta "The Pet of the Petticoats" (1831) in which Mr. Buckstone made his début at the Sadler's Wells and played again subsequently at the Adelphi, Mr. Barnett became the Musical Director of Madame Vestris (1797–1856) Theatre, "The Olympic" (1832) and composed "Win Her and Wear Her." This work was produced at Drury Lane and the original score is now in the Allen A. Brown music collection in the Boston Public Library.

Up to this time, "English Opera," so-called, had been merely drama interspersed with musical snatches, serving only to impede the action of the piece.

Mr. Barnett now determined to reform this altogether and set himself seriously to work to write and to produce a real English Opera, —

entirely independent of the traditional mode of the day, which to his mind was inadequate, unoriginal and absolutely inartistic. A libretto was written for him by Mr. J. Thackeray (the cousin of William Makepeace Thackeray) and on the evening of Monday, August 25, 1834, as appears by the original play bill, at the New Theatre Royal, Lyceum and English Opera House, was "produced for the first time the new grand opera called 'The Mountain Sylph,' the overture and music entirely new, composed by Mr. John Barnett." Then follows the cast of characters, with Miss Romer, as Eolia, the Mountain Sylph, and a description of scenery and incidents.

The success of this opera was immediate and was hailed as a new and welcome departure from the conventional English opera. Its first run was phenomenal — a hundred performances or more. Before me are the play bills of the first, forty-seventh and eighty-fourth performances. Certain numbers soon became classics, especially "Farewell to the Mountain," "This Magic Wove Scarf," etc. The opera was frequently reproduced, as appears by many play bills in September, 1839; at Drury Lane, May 19, 1852, by Louisa Pyne, etc. etc. In July, 1906, Dr. W. H. Cummings had the work put to study by the opera class at the Guild Hall School of Music, where it was given in the theatre attached to the school, "with distinct success," as appears by an elaborate article in the *Musical News*, London, July 14, 1906, which is too long to be quoted.

"The Mountain Sylph" may be justly said to have been the first of the strictly so-called English operas, and its composer has the indisputable claim to be considered the father of original and connected lyrical works in England.

It may be interesting to add that cordial marks of approval were tendered to him by the Queen, who was present on the first night and also on the one hundredth night.

Mr. Barnett's description of conditions at the time of the production of this opera is amusing, and has been preserved and recorded by a member of the family in the following language: —

"The singers of the chorus were, according to ancient traditions, in the habit of standing on the stage like statues, stolid and motionless, satisfied with merely grunting their respective parts. 'You must suit your action to your words,' shouted Mr. Barnett at them. 'Don't you see that you've got before you a witch, and that you want to drive her away?' 'Yes, but what are we to do?' was the answer. 'Do? what would you do if a fellow came into your house against your will, and

refused to go out of it?' 'Why, we should turn the rascal out, of course!' 'Well, then turn *her* out, that is all I require you to do.' Taking upon himself in this wise the dual functions of composer and stage manager, Mr. Barnett succeeded in revolutionizing the absurd customs of the past, and surprised the English public with a performance at once novel and greatly attractive."

"The Mountain Sylph" was followed by "Fair Rosamund," produced for the first time on Tuesday, February 28, 1837; Edwin Forrest had appeared as Richard III the evening before. "Fair Rosamund" was musically highly commended, but the story was not especially interesting. "Farinelli," produced at Drury Lane on Friday February 8, 1839, followed and seems to have had a distinct success.

The *Theatrical Observer* of Saturday, February 9, 1839, speaks of the production of "Farinelli" and mentions an incident in regard to it which may interest readers of to-day, inasmuch as the Balfe referred to as the singer of the title rôle in this opera was Michael William Balfe, the composer of the "Bohemian Girl" produced some years later. The *Observer* says, —

"Last night John Barnett's new opera of 'Farinelli' was produced at this Theatre, and notwithstanding a most unfortunate contretemps, had the most brilliant success; we allude to the hoarseness of Balfe, who played the principal character, and who sang in the first scene delightfully, but towards the end of the first act became suddenly attacked with hoarseness which increasing, he claimed the indulgence of the audience, and said, 'that he was placed in a most unpleasant situation, being so hoarse that it was impossible he could do justice to the music of Mr. Barnett; he would, however, proceed and do his best.' This appeal was received with cries of 'Bravo' and loud applause, in which Mr. Barnett joined heartily. The music of this opera is of the highest order, abounding in delightful melodies, and the instrumentation is rich and brilliant. It is impossible in our confined space to point out the individual beauties of this delightful opera, but we cannot help noticing the opening chorus, a duet between Balfe and Miss Romer, which was rapturously encored; another duet by Balfe and Miss Poole, also encored, an exquisite song by Balfe, and a double chorus, these were all gems. The libretto is by the brother of the composer. The opera was hailed throughout with acclamation, and the composer and all the principal performers were called before the curtain."

From the contemporary notices, we learn that on Tuesday evening.

February 19th, "her Majesty honored Drury Lane with her presence, to witness the performance of Barnett's new and highly successful opera of 'Farinelli,' which was performed throughout with a degree of excellence that elicited the most tremendous applause. 'Farinelli,' without a doubt, will live for many years to come. Before leaving the theatre, the Queen expressed her approbation of the beauty of the music."

Shortly before the production of "Farinelli," Mr. Barnett married the youngest daughter of the celebrated violoncellist, Robert Lindley, born at Rotherham, England, March 4, 1776; died in London, June 13, 1855. A few years later he retired to Cheltenham, carrying with him a great number of manuscripts, among them an opera entitled "Kathleen," the libretto of which was furnished by his friend, Sheridan Knowles. The manuscript has been presented to the Allen A. Brown Collection of the Boston Public Library.

Mr. Barnett made his home in and near Cheltenham for the rest of his life, a teacher with a widespread clientele of devoted and admiring pupils.

Though removed from the scenes of his early triumphs, he continued writing songs and musical pieces of every character, and published a work on the voice and the best means of developing it, which was at the time, and perhaps is even to-day, among the most exhaustive treatises on this subject.

It may be well to note the fact that up to his very last years he constantly gave forth songs of originality and beauty which were always of a most melodic character.

In 1885, for example, he published a series of five songs to words by Thomas Moore. A London newspaper admirer wrote of this as follows: "While on the subject, I may mention that the veteran John Barnett has just published a series of five songs to words by Thomas Moore. This is a peculiar circumstance. Barnett is eighty-three years of age, and is hale enough to encourage the hope that he may see the century out. He abides at Cotteswold, Cheltenham, and he is as bright of brain and sound of limb — with his heart in the right place — as he was the day he produced 'The Mountain Sylph.'"

The memory of two songs is so interesting to the writer of these lines that he ventures to speak of them here.

When Mr. Barnett was nearly four score years of age, he came from his library, with his quick step and face lighted up with a bright smile, and carrying a manuscript behind his back, into the music-room where

him, he playing the violoncello, and the boy the piano, or perhaps the lad singing for his host's entertainment.

In later years he was the intimate friend of a coterie of young men, who, in 1833, were gathered together in Paris, William Makepeace Thackeray, then a pupil in painting in the atelier of Collignon, Douglas Jerrold, the Mayhew brothers, Mark Lemon, Leach and others, and it was in his rooms that this little coterie mooted and discussed a comic journal which was afterwards born and known to London and to the rest of the world as *Punch*. It may be said to have been conceived in the room of John Barnett, in Paris. Curiously enough, Mr. Barnett did not know that his friend, Thackeray, the painter, was the same man as Thackeray, the writer, until long after Thackeray had earned literary distinction.

His stories of some of these men and others whom he knew in London were absorbingly interesting to one born in America. He would tell, for instance, of the club known as the "Mulberries," which used to meet at a certain tavern near Drury Lane, and which always celebrated Shakespeare's birthday in some marked manner, on which night they would illustrate some incident in Shakespeare's life. It was to this tavern, by the way, that Richard III and Richmond would hasten by the back entrance of Drury Lane and partake of a loving cup together before they met in bloody combat a few minutes later in the battle of Bosworth Field.

At one meeting of the "Mulberries," Douglas Jerrold wrote the essay upon the theme, "Shakespeare as a Deer Stealer." The subject was illustrated in music by John Barnett, in painting by Edwin Landseer, and in the general discussion by Sheridan Knowles, Laman Blanchard, and others of that ilk.

On being asked where were all the interesting memorials that must be connected with that club, Barnett merely shook his head and said, "So far as I know they were taken by Blanchard and were stored or kept in one of the rooms where the present Lyceum Theatre now stands."

His own life was so prolific in creative works that one might suppose that he would forget his musical and literary offspring. But it was not so. On being asked whether or not he had written a certain operetta, his answer was "No, I never wrote an operetta of that name." On being told that Cassell's "Old London" made the statement that such an operetta had been written by him, he turned to his wife with the words, "Eliza, did I ever write an operetta of that name?" She re-

plied, "No, John, no, — you never did." After thinking for a moment, he said, "I probably wrote the lyrics for some play of that name, as I frequently did, but never an operetta."

His two daughters, by the way, bore the names "Rosamund" and "Kathleen," after his operas.

Perhaps enough has been said to indicate something of what John Barnett did and what he stood for in his own day and generation.

The transfer to Boston of some of his original scores, written with his fine precision and accuracy, may be of more than passing interest to students of music this side of the Atlantic. At any rate, it was a gracious offering of the children of John Barnett who live in England to join with the child of John Barnett living in Boston, to add to the interest of that Musical Collection which enriches the Boston Public Library and which attests the more than royal munificence of Allen A. Brown, one of the citizens of Boston.

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